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THE IOWA HOMEMAKER

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The True Spirit of Christmas

DR. O. H. CESSNA

Chaplain Iowa State College.

I like the ring of sincerity in this topic. The emphasis seems to be on the word "true." Evidently the desire is to go beyond the mere surface observance of the day to its deeper meaning. I think this attitude is a true characteristic of our serious minded young people of today. They become impatient with what has been when it is enforced simply because it has been. The touch stone for them is not simply the traditional but the real.

It seems to me, as I check up on the thought of the present day, there is a very manifest note of seriousness. The terrible cataclysm of the Great War and the disillusionment following have had their effect. Men have turned to the deeper significance of things. They have come to realize that the difficulty was deep seated and constitutional in its nature. They have come to feel the inadequacy of mere human agency to meet the need and have turned to God and religion. President Coolidge has recently given strong utterance to these convictions:

"We do not need more material development, we need more spiritual development.

We do not need more intellectual power, we need more character.

We do not need more law, we need more religion."

So this emphasis on the word "true" is in harmony with both the sincerity of thoughtful young people and also with those who see clearly the needs of the times. The suggestion "The True Meaning of Christmas" may mean that there have been associated with Christmas a lot of things that have drifted far from its real purpose and intent and the effort is to call us back to its "true" observance.

There are two aspects of this matter—the primary and what we might call derived interest. To reserve the order, on the one hand, Christmas has come to stand for one of the great "Home Days" in our yearly calendar. It is marked by vacations and holidays in our schools and business. It is the time when those who are away turn thoughtfully to home and, if possible, find their way to the old home town. It is a time when we remember the loved ones there with our gifts and greetings. Step into any book store and see the great assortment of Christmas greetings. You will find they all contain expressions of joy and good wishes—there is not a note of sadness among them all. If we have griefs and troubles we seek to lay them aside on this day. It seems to be a day of reconciliation;

even great nations at war have been known to declare a truce for the time being and the soldiers of opposing armies frequently mingle in friendly converse and greetings. They lay aside in the presence of the great spirit of good will of the day and mingle freely in friendly associations.

It is the day—the joy-day of children. Some of the happiest scenes of home life are those of Christmas week. The days before are filled with mysterious doings. Packages are slipped in and hidden away and a kind of mystery is thrown around the occasion. The tree is prepared; the bright decorations are strewn over it; the candles are scattered about in the midst of the display. The presents are labeled and brought in and hung about on the branches or piled on the table beneath. The children are in a very riot of joy and an eye is kept on them lest they slip in and made discoveries before hand. Indeed it is the day of all days in child life when the family is all together. The day is spent in feasting and joy and somehow the home-fires are rekindled and the home-ties are cemented more securely. Edgar A. Guest has beautifully pictured the childhood joys of the Christmas time in his delightful poem, "A Boy on Christmas Day" given in his "A Path to Home."

If I could have my wish tonight it would not be for wealth or fame,
It would not be for some delight that men who live in luxury claim,
But it would be that I might rise at three or four a. m. to see,
With eager, happy, boyish eyes, my presents on the Christmas tree.
Thruout this world there is no joy, I know now I am growing gray,
So rich as being just a boy, a little boy on Christmas Day.

I'd like once more to stand and gaze enraptured on a tinsel tree,
With eyes that know just how to blaze, a heart still tuned to ecstasy;
I'd like to feel the old delight, the surging thrills within me come;
To love a thing with all my might, to grasp the pleasure of a drum;
To know the meaning of a toy—a meaning lost to minds blase;
To be just once again a boy, a little boy on Christmas Day.

I'd like to see a pair of skates the way they looked to me back then,
Before I'd turned from boyhood's gates and marched into the world of men;
I'd like to see a jackknife, too, with

those same eager, dancing eyes
That couldn't fault or blemish view; I'd like to feel the same surprise,
The pleasure, free from all alloy, that has forever passed away,
When I was just a little boy and had my faith in Christmas Day.

Oh, little, laughing, roughish lad, the king that rules across the sea
Would give his scepter if he had such joy as now belong to thee!
And beards of gray would give their gold, and all the honors they possess,
Once more within their grasp to hold the present fee of happiness.
Earth sends no greater, surer joy, as, too soon, thou, as I, shall say,
Than that of him who is a boy, a little boy on Christmas Day.

Who would want to kill Christmas day with all its joys and delightful associations with home and childhood. And yet it is too true that the day is frequently spoiled by a spirit of dissipation and commercialism. Some have even thought that it resulted in more harm than good and have even called for its cessation. Voices, however, have been raised against this treatment of the noble day and new emphasis is being put on its true significance. A very suggestive article appeared in the December number of the Delinator, entitled "The Man Who Tried to Kill Christmas." It is typical of the appeal being made by many thoughtful people. Two rather striking statements show this attitude. They are as follows:

"I am taking Christmas off my private calendar. Hereafter I will discontinue the custom of offering gifts or other Christmas tokens, and earnestly request you all to do the same with me. The modern Christmas is now actually a day of much worry, distress, sorrow and ill-will."

"I think Christmas is the year's greatest day. Men look to it as a source from which to draw the power and will to daily express their devotion to highest ideals, as a day when the brotherhood of man embraces the world."

One man wrote both those opinions of Christmas. He wrote them both from the heart. It was a heart full of bitterness when he penned the first lines; a heart full of understanding and sympathy when he wrote the last.

Yes, there is much in Christmas and we could not spare it from our calendar even if we only thought of these secondary associations which gather about it. This

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True Spirit of Christmas

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gladness and joy from our childhood days and on through our happy adult home life, have become associated with the day. Even this aspect makes Christmas the great Home Day of the year.

But there is a deeper meaning to Christmas that should not be overlooked and it is this deeper meaning which makes the "true" observance of Christmas the most effective. It is this aspect of it that must be emphasized if we are to rescue the day from dissipation and commercialism. It is the element that is emphasized by President Coolidge in his reference to the need of religion. We must enter into the real religious spirit of the day.

Not only is it the principal day in the joys of home life; it is also a most important day in the church calendar of every variety of Christian service throughout the world. Christmas day and Easter are marked days and they are such because of their connection with Jesus, the Savior of Men. From the opening anthem of the angel choir as they sang on that natal day, "Glory to God in the Highest, Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men" to the last anthem and Christmas carol that will be sung about the Christmas tree, this day had been emphasized as the joy-day of religion in the world. It is interesting to note the song messages for Christmas time. We will sing them again this coming Christmas about our tree on the campus. Here are some of them: "Hark, the Glad Song," "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," "Glory to the New Born King," "O Come all Ye Faithful," "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" and the beautiful Noel, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night," and that beautiful song of Phillip Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and Isaac Watt's great hymn set to Handel's inspiring music, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come." All these express the deep spiritual significance of the day and they have found echo in the sincere religious heart of the world. This is true because it shows the coming of God—the great Father heart to meet the world's need. It is the fulfillment of the great promise on which the hope of humanity hangs—the incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus is God speaking in language that we can understand. It is the token of the great love which has found expression in the oft repeated utterance "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

To understand the "true" spirit of Christmas in its deeper significance is to know Him whose advent into the world is thus so joyously heralded. There are three or four great events in his life that need to be closely linked together and we need to have them all in mind to understand the true significance of any one of them. These events are the Birth scene celebrated on Christmas, the Garden and Calvary where Jesus goes down into the depths because of the sin of the world, and then his Resurrection where he is triumphant over all the opposing forces and "brings life and immortality to light through his Gospel," so that it is possible for our hearts to be thrilled with the "Joy of the Lord which is our strength." This "Joy of the Lord" must be understood and made actual in experience if we are to get the true meaning of Christmas. If Christmas is to be of any especial avail for the present, it must not simply stand

for a memory of what has been but what may be actual in experience today. I am convinced that the thing that is needed today for the new edition of Christianity that is so necessary to grapple with the great problems of the present is the realization that we have the actual presence of Jesus in the world today, more gloriously true and more helpfully available than ever in the days of his flesh. We sometimes sing with hearty wish, our child song, "I would like to have been with Him then," and we seem to think of it all as only in the past. It will be necessary for us to revise our thought and add "I would rather be with Him now." In other words we are to think of Jesus not only as a precious memory but as an actual presence in the world today. His coming as little babe in Bethlehem entering into all the needs and limitations of humanity is but a fore token of that more triumphant presence in the spirit in the world today. The true significance of Christmas can only come when Jesus Christ is made real to human hearts now. Let me repeat it again, Jesus is God, speaking in language that we can understand—"And the Word was made Flesh and Dwelt among Men." And Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God because he answers the fundamental needs of human nature and there will be the discovery of the true meaning of Christmas when we avail ourselves in human experience of the actual presence and help of Jesus Christ. He meets these fundamental needs of human nature by giving a satisfying vision of God, a sense of divine forgiveness, divine companionship and guidance in daily living, and power to turn the antagonistic facts of

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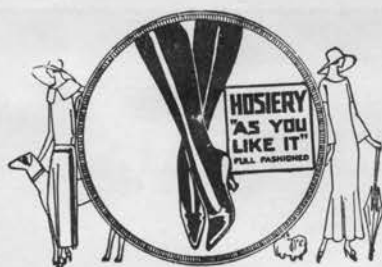
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True Spirit of Christmas

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life into personal victorious strength and progress. In short he brings "The inspiration of the eternal into the duties of the passing hour." This is what Dr. John Douglas Adam calls "The Heart of Christianity." Dr. Adam says, "When we turn to the first followers of Christ, we find for them, the heart of Christianity consisted of an actual relationship to the spiritual presence of their Master who had survived death. Their Christianity was primarily a deep spiritual fellowship with the Master who had passed beyond physical limitation to a spiritual leadership which transcended space. And they actually knew him, far better, and they knew his aims and purposes far better, in their purely spiritual relationship to Him, than they did in the days of his flesh."

This then will make Christmas day the Glad Day of the year if it means the discovery to us of the real presence of the Master in our lives today. In the presence of that reality we shall come to put proper value on all these great days of joy this will mean that God is not only brought within human focus but that His resources are made humanly available and that we shall receive power to be true witnesses for him in the world. Our Christianity will not be "primarily a task but a power to achieve a task."

The "true" meaning of Christmas will surely come when we associate with it, not only all the beautiful joys of child life and home association, and the joy of giving and making others happy in our gifts, but also when we see through and beyond all these the real power and presence of Him who is in the world today, the inspiration of our hope and courage and song as he was in the days of his advent when he came as the "Little Babe in Bethlehem."

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